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HOUSING AND HEALTH

By LAWRENCE VEILLER,
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Dirt and disease have gone hand in hand too long. As modern surgery owes its rapid strides to the discovery of asepsis and the banishment of dirt from the operating room, so modern medicine is about to come into its own through the banishment of dirt from our communal life. The slum, the mother of disease, is now doomed. Its end is in sight. From ocean to ocean, throughout the land, there is a newly awakened consciousness of our past folly and a slowly dawning perception of our inherent right to decent conditions of living.

We have paid dear for our slums, and have given hostages to fortune, leaving a heavy debt for posterity to liquidate. No one has even attempted to estimate the cost to the nation of our bad housing conditions, because it is an impossible task. Who can say of the vast army of the unemployed, how large a portion of the industrially inefficient are so because of lowered physical vitality caused by disadvantageous living conditions? To what extent is the forbidding atmosphere of so many homes an element in the problem of inebriety? Of the burdens which the State is called upon to bear in the support of almshouses for the dependent, hospitals for the sick, asylums for the insane, prisons and reformatories for the criminal, what portion can fairly be attributed to adverse early environment?

Despite our vaunted civilization, our material prosperity, our increasing love and appreciation of things artistic, our greatly improved architecture, our musical development, our mastery of the mechanical world, our readiness of invention, our diffusion of education, our higher standards of liberty, in a word, our greatly increased culture, we are still in some respects "barbarous America." From the past no word comes to us of the slums of ancient Tyre or Sardis or of noble Athens—only a faint breath from decadent Rome, to tell us that the worst they had did not approach the evils of present-day America.

In the great majority of our cities we are still in that rudimentary state of sanitary knowledge where we know no better than to surround ourselves with the vilest elements of human waste, which we allow to remain near the homes of the poor for long periods of time, turning living places which should be gardens of delight and centers of sweet repose into nothing more nor less than disease factories, whose daily output is literally disease and death. We still suffer to remain in large numbers even in the crowded quarters of our cities, where the poor are huddled close together, and where disease spreads quickly, thousands of vile privies, vaults, sinks, cesspools, outdoor closets, "sanitary conveniences," so-called. No one knows how many thousands of these there are, but the city where they are not present in large numbers is exceptional. Even New York, with its four and three-quarter millions of people, had 7000 of them up to a few years ago. Baltimore still has 70,000 earth closets, and through all her existence has had no system of public sewers, but only now is installing one. St. Louis can still show 12,000 privy vaults, Philadelphia and Chicago have literally hundreds of thousands of outdoor closets, and many privies and cesspools. Indianapolis, Milwaukee, Pittsburg, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Nashville, Birmingham—all have to admit the presence of these ancient evils by the thousands. The list might be added to indefinitely. Hardly a city in America is free from this blight.

That such conditions could prevail among the cultured, well-to-do, progressive people of America to such degree is unthinkable. That people of intelligence and wealth would continue to live in such surroundings is not to be believed. And, of course, they do not. These conditions are to be found only among the homes of the poor—in our slums, in those foreign colonies which we have allowed to spring up in the various sections of our cities, "empires within an empire," segregated from American institutions, isolated communities feeling but slightly the touch of democracy—"social Saharas," as they have been aptly called.

Just because these evils have been removed from our immediate sight we have foolishly fancied ourselves secure, and have believed that they do not touch us. But the "mighty miasmatic breath blown from the slums" penetrates all parts of the town. No home is

exempt, no person secure. Disease, no respecter of persons, visits all alike.

The sordidness of it all, the degrading baseness of it, unfortunately is withheld from the eyes of most of us. What it means to the people who have to live in the midst of it we can but faintly conceive. Let us frankly admit that these conditions result in imposing upon the great mass of our working people habits of life that are more compatible with the life of animals than with that of human beings. What it must mean in its effect on the standards of decency, of modesty, of morality even, of young girls growing into womanhood, I leave to the reader's imagination.

The effect upon health is direct and intimate. To the debilitating influence of the noisome odors in the hot summer weather may be traced much of the illness of the poor; to such influences are largely traceable their lowered vitality and inability to readily resist disease. The connection is even more direct; myriads of flies swarm throughout the hot months, feed on the contents of the vaults, and then proceed to infect the food supply of the people in the neighboring stores, in the kitchens where food is preparing—and with their dangerous burden crawl upon the faces and bodies of the sleeping infants in the homes of the poor. Nor do they stop there—even the homes of the rich are not exempt from the dangers of the typhoid fly.

That conditions such as these should grow up in a young community like America, without our becoming conscious of them, is not strange, but the time is rapidly passing when we can longer plead ignorance and extreme youth as excuses for our failure to act.

Few cities have as yet dealt effectively with this situation, but, fortunately, the number which have awakened to the significance of these conditions is constantly increasing.

We are rapidly passing out of the stage where the representative men of a community with whispers discuss these evils and in subdued tones deprecate their ventilation on the ground that it is "bad for business" and will "hurt the city's fair fame." Far-seeing men realize that any such ostrich-like policy but postpones the evil day, that the continued tolerance of the conditions in the long run injures the city and that a low death rate and a

well-earned reputation as "a city of homes" is one of the best assets a city can have. Such men realize that frank, open-minded discussion of health needs is a prerequisite to their cure. Diagnosis must precede treatment. In many cities groups of business men, chambers of commerce, etc., are themselves actively taking hold of these problems. They are abandoning the policy of concealment and working that there may be nothing to conceal.

Strangely enough, democracy itself seems to be an obstacle to sanitary progress. It is a disconcerting and startling discovery to make, but the evidence is unmistakable. In those cities where the "workingman owns his own home," where there are miles and miles of small one-story and two-story houses, the sanitary authorities will tell you that they have the greatest difficulty in meeting health needs, in securing adequate appropriations, in enforcing higher standards. A low tax rate becomes in such communities a fetch of sinister effect. Where the community is made up to a predominant degree of working people, many of whom "own" their own homes by the payment of but \$25 or \$50, as is frequently the case, the tax rate becomes directly felt to a degree that cannot be appreciated in other communities where the burden of high taxes is more widely distributed and is frequently disguised in the form of rent and increased prices of commodities.

In such cities every public expenditure is viewed with the closest scrutiny—public officials, who owe their office to popular vote, are loath to pursue any course of action that will impose upon the electorate at large additional expense. Bond issues for needed public improvements, for installing a system of public sewers, for example, or for alley improvement, are often voted only with great difficulty.

The small property owner, with limited resources, staggering frequently under burdens which he should never have placed on his own shoulders, lured by "land hunger," and sometimes by the hunger to be a landlord, is the greatest obstacle to progress. Burdened as he is, limited in his intelligence, his own standard of living low, his knowledge of sanitary science practically *nil*, it is not strange that he should not place the welfare of the community above that of self-interest, and should not divorce in his

consideration of public questions, their effect on his own pocket from their value to his neighbors and to posterity.

The low standards of living of such a man are further obstacles to sanitary advance. Living himself under sordid surroundings, content with the conditions that he has known from early childhood, he can see no reason for the new "fads and fancies" which the health authorities would compel him to provide for his tenants. If vaults are good enough for him, they are quite good enough for his tenants, whom he considers as social and industrial inferiors.

The false cry for "economy" which now is so popular, and which is usually a cry for false economy, threatens to wreck our institutions. Its appeal to the taxpayer is immediate and satisfactory. His materialistic sense is gratified, and he cares little if it means a serious setback to the sanitary and social progress of the community. It will take the country years to recover from its present hysterical outbreak in this direction.

It will be a long time, I fear, before we return to a sane realization that with our advancing standards of civilization, the increased burdens imposed by unrestricted immigration, and our constantly enlarging conceptions of governmental functions, expenses of government must necessarily increase from year to year. New sources of revenue must be developed, due economy should be practiced, waste eliminated so far as practicable, but retrenchment in public expenditures should never be made at the expense of the health of the community.

It is due largely to the conditions just described that we have as yet in no city dealt effectively with our alley problem. The alley is both a blessing and a curse. As a means of letting light and air into the interior of city blocks that would otherwise be without it, it is a distinct gain. And the few cities that have no alleys feel their misfortune in this regard most keenly. The small, pocketed back yards, shut away from the free current of air, are unknown in the city with alleys. The alley is generally however, an evil. As a minor street, hidden away at the rear of everything, it becomes the dumping ground for all the cast-off material of humanity. Here will be found collected, in all stages of picturesque disorder and sordid squalor, all of the unpleasant things of our material existence.

The privies generally are close to it. Piles of manure, those pest factories which breed uncontrolled the typhoid fly by myriads, frequently overflow into it. Uncollected garbage, in the hot summer months, lies there in decaying heaps. Surface water, slops, wash-tub emptyings, leakage from privies and from stables cover the surface with slime. Old paper, tin cans, rubbish and refuse of every kind are everywhere; huge rats, living and dead, add to the general horror.

In many cases, these are the playgrounds of the children of the working people. In some they are the only approach to their homes, the sole outlook upon life they get from the windows of their dwelling places. And we wonder at the improvidence of the poor, at their inebriety, at their shiftlessness! We are surprised at the burdens which the State has to bear in the support of the defective and delinquent.

Unpaved, as most alleys are, the cleaning often is a difficult problem. This difficulty is greatly enhanced by the fact that in most cities the city itself assumes no responsibility for their cleanliness, but looks to the abutting property owner to perform this function. The result is what might be expected. We years ago passed beyond that stage of our development where we imposed on private citizens the responsibility for cleaning the streets in front of their houses, but we still, in many cities, foolishly expect them to clean the streets in the rear. In few cities are the alleys policed or lighted at night. They become often, therefore, the haunt of criminals, and naturally lend themselves to practices which shun the light.

All of these evil conditions are well recognized in most of our cities, but the same causes that have tended to perpetuate the evils of the privy vault have been operative here as well. The small property owner, to whose wishes the elected public official is sensitive, objects to assessments for paving the alleys. He sees no "benefit," in the financial sense, to his property, and he is unwilling, as a rule, to be asked to pay for an improvement which, from his point of view, does not "improve," and which he thinks too good for the class of people from whom he draws his revenues.

The alley, if it is to remain, must be treated as a street. It must be paved; it must be cleaned at regular intervals, that is,

kept clean, not made clean; it must be lighted and it must be policed. Before any of these things can be done the city must officially assume responsibility for it; where it does not already own the fee, the owners must dedicate it to the city.

The cry for "economy" and the desire to keep down the tax rate operate against the carrying out of these measures. If the alleys are to be cleaned by the city as often as the streets are cleaned, the cost of street cleaning will increase at least fifty per cent. So, if they are lighted and policed, the city's yearly expense will be similarly increased.

But it is a false economy that stands in the way of carrying out these greatly needed reforms. It is saving at the spigot and wasting at the bung-hole. We are paying the cost now, in fact, but in indirect and less obvious ways. It will cost the city more for police, but less for police courts and jails; more for street cleaning, but less for hospitals and relief. It is better economy to keep people well than to get them well, to prevent crime than to punish it. The cost must be paid one way or another. If we refuse to pay it in treasure now, we must pay it in both blood and treasure in the end.

The filth and squalor which surround the homes of the poor in so many of our cities may be traced to similar causes. From the very nature of things, the working people cannot be expected to hire carts and cart away the refuse which accumulates. Nor is there much likelihood of the average landlord doing this under the conditions of our ordinary urban existence.

This is a function of the municipality, and, if the city neglects it, the responsibility must be placed where it belongs, upon the city officials who are so benighted that they do not see the short-sightedness of their policy, and upon the citizens who are so penurious that they prefer to tolerate the evil conditions rather than increase the cost of government. There are few cities in America to-day where the garbage is collected with sufficient frequency or regularity. And the city which collects rubbish, ashes and other waste is as yet the exception rather than the rule.

Tuberculosis, that sinister terror of former years, is thought by many to be about to vanish from us, but sober vision indicates that it will be many years before we see it disappear. Although it would seem that no one could have escaped learning the im-

perative necessity of fresh air and sunlight, yet, notwithstanding that we have been taught that tuberculosis is a "house disease," that in dark, unventilated rooms it thrives and flourishes, and that the germs cannot live in strong sunlight, yet in how few cities is the speculative builder restrained from adding new dark rooms to swell the present number. In growing Western cities, where space is plentiful and land is cheap, new tenement houses are built with half the rooms dark—it is easier to do it that way. And, as a nation, we normally choose the easiest way. In no city, East or West, have we so far progressed as to prohibit in our private dwellings and our public buildings rooms without direct outside light and air. Everywhere, irrespective of land values, one encounters an intense, individualistic desire to cover over an undue amount of the lot, and occupy, if possible, every foot of land.

In our houses on wheels, the railroad cars and trolleys, where disease spreads most easily and rapidly, we have just begun to enforce standards of ventilation; one might almost say we have hardly commenced it. In our public buildings we are still in the dark ages; our court houses, our municipal and state buildings, our schools and churches, our workshops, our theaters and the moving picture shows, where so many hundreds of thousands of people congregate nightly, proper ventilation is the exception rather than the rule.

We have a long and difficult campaign of education ahead of us before we can approach reasonable health standards in this regard. Most people do not want fresh air in their homes or elsewhere. It is not only "night air" that is dreaded, but all fresh air. Let a man open a window in a railroad train, or trolley car, or even at a convention of physicians or sanitarians, and see what happens. How quickly some one closes it who cannot stand "the draft." All the ignorance in this regard cannot be charged to the "great unwashed."

Viewing these conditions, it seems premature, at least, to talk of establishing "garden cities" and "zone systems." These highly desirable ideals, so successfully carried out in the Old World, must wait until we can bring ourselves to attend to the elementary principles of sanitation and the rudimentary principles of community living. It is as if the doctor attending a

patient desperately ill with typhoid or pneumonia were to concern himself before the crisis of the disease had passed with the patient's diet during the convalescent stage. We have not yet reached the convalescent stage, but are still battling for the patient's life.

Underlying all of the evils we have thus far discussed is our failure, as a nation, to develop sanitary inspection as a vital adjunct of municipal administration. We lead the world in the development of the science of sanitary plumbing, in our ready adaptation of new mechanisms and devices, the products of our inventive genius, but sanitary inspection here is still in its infancy.

In most cities it is still unexplored territory. With two exceptions, New York and Chicago, no city in America has as yet developed a system of inspection that is worthy of the name of system. And even in these two cities only a beginning has been made.

In the majority of cases we are still employing methods that belong to the pre-glacial period of sanitary science. In practically all our health departments we sit down now, as we did years ago, and placidly await "citizens' complaints" of unsanitary conditions, assuming that, when we have attended to these we have done all that need be done. Perhaps, when we were a homogeneous nation of American citizens, it was safe to trust to this method, but that period has long passed. With our foreign "colonies" in every city, with the mass of our working population made up, more and more, of the peasantry of Europe, ignorant of our language and customs, unused to our standards of living, and unable to make articulate their dissatisfaction with the conditions under which they are compelled to live, we can no longer look to any such methods of discovering and remedying sanitary evils.

Many of the poor in our large cities do not know that there is such a thing as a board of health; of those who do know of its existence, few know where to find its offices, or, if aware, cannot afford the time to travel to them to call attention to evil conditions, and the great mass is too illiterate to send written complaints. Back of it all, too, is the certain knowledge, gained from bitter past experience, that if the source of the complaint

is discovered, eviction by the landlord is sure to follow. So, the worst conditions remain undiscovered, for weeks, often for months, sometimes for years, and the poor finally become hardened to them, believing them unescapable and inherent in poverty itself.

This system, too, has interesting "by-products" which the student of social and municipal affairs should not overlook. It makes for unfair discrimination. It seems to indicate to the landlord whose property is frequently complained against that he is singled out, "persecuted," as he puts it, when he sees worse conditions in neighboring property tolerated and left alone. Nothing can convince him that it is not due to political "pull" on the part of his neighbor that he is able to escape attention. He is prone to charge graft, politics and crookedness to the administration, and thus there is bred in the public mind that distrust of popular government which is rapidly making the holding of public office unattractive.

In place of this casual, haphazard method there must be substituted the only system of sanitary inspection that is worthy of the name. Instead of sitting calmly waiting for complaints, health inspectors must systematically go about "looking for trouble"—they will find plenty. Instead of sending a man to look at one thing in one house, because it is complained about, there should be a well-trained corps of men going over every part of the homes of the poor, systematically and thoroughly, scrutinizing carefully every part of the building where trouble might naturally be expected—all the probable danger points. Such inspection would include the cellar, the water closets and privies, the public halls and stairs, the roof, the out-premises, the individual apartments and the plumbing, with especial emphasis laid on the public parts of the building. It should be done on the health board's initiative, and should be periodic, that is, at sufficiently frequent intervals to ensure the maintenance of the homes of the poor in proper sanitary condition. Once a month is the ideal. Once a year is the minimum. Three times a year should be practicable in most cities.

Coupled with this inspection to discover sanitary evils so that they may be abated, there should go a system of "instructive sanitary inspection" by trained women inspectors. It sounds

paternalistic, but we might as well face the fact that many of the poor must be taught how to live. This is especially true of the inhabitants of our large foreign "colonies." To many of them American standards of living are totally new. They have no conception of the functions of modern plumbing, for instance, and often fail to realize that methods of waste disposal which were satisfactory to them in sparsely settled country districts of rural Europe, and which there brought no evils in their train, may not safely be followed in the more closely built-up sections of our urban communities.

Instruction of this kind must necessarily be undertaken with the mothers and children. In the homes it must be given by women, and women who have the power and authority to follow up their advice with orders, when necessary. Much can be done in the schools. Whatever is done should be done in a practical way, with apt illustration, and through direct personal influence, rather than by distribution of "literature."

It is easy to say, "These things should be done," and they commend themselves at once to most minds. In only two cities in the United States, however, New York and Chicago, is a system of periodic sanitary inspection carried on. And in only one city is any work being done along the lines of "instructive sanitary inspection."

Why, one asks, should American cities be so far behind the enlightened standards of sanitary science? Partly because we have drifted along, choosing the line of least resistance, and partly because we have fallen into a rut in our health work and have only just begun to stand off and look at it and weigh its value.

The failure to progress faster and to reach higher standards is, however, due to far more fundamental causes. We have hitherto not been civilized enough or intelligent enough to be willing to spend money for the preservation of health. In hundreds of cities, still, the health commissioner receives no compensation, or so slight a one that he can afford to give but a small portion of his time to the work.

In every city in the country the health department is terribly undermanned. It cannot begin to attempt to do what it knows to be imperatively necessary for the city's welfare. I can con-

ceive of no more trying situation than that which most of our earnest and conscientious health commissioners encounter year after year, having to sit helplessly by and see their recommendations ignored, and the annual toll for unnecessary disease and death increase year after year. The blame for the evil conditions cannot be laid at the doors of our health officials. With but few exceptions, they have done their part, and if, after years of effort of this kind, they finally lapse into a state of hopeless indifference, they are not to be blamed. Who would not give up hope under such circumstances? The blame must be placed on us all—on the whole community, on our best citizens, and our worst. It is our fault and no one's else that these conditions continue.

We have been so stupid or so careless that we have paid little or no attention to our slums. We have been willing to spend money lavishly to protect property, but not to protect human life and health. Large sums we grant annually in all our cities for the support of the police and fire departments, but we grudgingly apportion mere pittance to our health departments.

In New York $1\frac{1}{2}$ per cent. of the city's annual expenditures is for health work, as compared with 5 per cent. for fire protection, 9 per cent. for the police, and 17 per cent. for education. And New York leads the country in its health expenditures and has more generous treatment in this regard than any other city in America. And yet, even in New York last year, where its efficient health commissioner certified that the welfare of the city required the expenditure of \$4,076,578 for health work during the coming year, the financial authorities granted him but \$2,823,499.

What are we to think of a city like Chicago, with all its wealth and culture, where the city authorities pay no heed to the statement of the expert head of its health department, that \$1,500,000 is requisite to meet the health needs of the city, and allow him little more than one-third of that amount? And this in the face of a campaign of education, in which the health authorities showed just what the citizens of Chicago could buy with their money in the way of health.

In the face of such statements as the following, coming from

the highest official authority, it is difficult to understand how such a decision could have been reached:

Chicago now has a 21-cent per capita health department. A 21-cent health department for Chicago can hold the gross death rate under 16 per 1000 for a few years. It can hold the number of deaths from diphtheria at about 800; from scarlet fever at about 600; typhoid at about 300, and baby deaths from summer complaint at about 3000. It can keep smallpox epidemics at about twelve years apart, and paralyzing epidemics of diphtheria or scarlet fever about four or six years apart.

A health department spending 50 cents per capita should put diphtheria down to, say, 100 deaths per year; scarlet fever to about 500; typhoid to 120, and cut off 5 per cent. from the consumption mortality. It should be able to add 10 years to the smallpox intervals and 3 or 4 years to the diphtheria and scarlet fever intervals.

The final conclusion is that we can have freedom from preventable diseases in proportion as we are willing to pay for it. We cannot have something for nothing. A 21-cent health department means about 15,000 deaths from preventable disease a year. If we pay more, we will have fewer. If we pay less, we shall have more.

Which shall it be: Dollars or deaths?

In the last analysis, it all resolves itself back to the degree of intelligence and enlightened public sentiment which are to be found in the community.

Still, the outlook for the future is hopeful. We are passing out of the dark ages of sanitary science. Housing and health are receiving each year increased attention, increased thought. We are rapidly ceasing to be "barbarous America."